Gender-inclusivity and gender-neutrality in foreign language teaching: The case of French

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Abstract

This is a secondary research discussion paper on the issue of non-conforming gender-inclusivity or neutrality in foreign language teaching of gender-based languages. Australian universities welcome increasingly diverse populations of students. One source of diversity among the student population is characterised by the notion of gendered identities, and especially the affirmation of the rights of LGBTQIA+ communities. Universities aim to show equal respect to all gendered identities. It entails using the language that is most respectful to refer to people in a non-sexist, gender-neutral, or gender-inclusive manner, and to allow students to use the language they are most comfortable with. The demands for gender-inclusive and/or gender-neutral language brings some new challenges with respect to the teaching of gender-based foreign languages. In this article, I delineate these challenges with regards to the teaching of French as a foreign language. There is a growing body of literature on ESL Queer teaching, but a paucity of information about this issue in the foreign language teaching of gender-based languages. Even the best-intentioned teacher can therefore feel insecure because of the lack of information. I specifically review strategies on how to deal with the introduction of gender-inclusive and gender-neutral modes of expression in foreign language teaching, dealing with so-called inclusive writing and the neo-morphemes that have been proposed, and examine how language teachers can raise awareness among their student population about LGBTQIA+ issues.

Keywords: language-inclusivity, gender-neutrality, French as a second language, non-binarity, LGBTQIA+

Introduction

This paper discusses the issue of non-conforming gender-inclusivity or neutrality in foreign language teaching of gender-based languages. Australian universities welcome and acknowledge increasingly diverse populations of students, and one source of diversity among the student population is characterised by the notion of gendered identities, not the least of which is the affirmation of the rights

of LGBTQIA+ communities.[i] It is common practice for universities to endeavour to show equal respect to all gendered identities, and this entails using the language that is most respectful to refer to people in a non-sexist, gender-neutral or gender-inclusive manner and to allow students to use the language they are most comfortable with. The demands for gender-inclusivity and/or gender-neutrality brings some new challenges with respect to the teaching of gender-based foreign languages.[ii] In this article, I delineate more precisely these challenges with regards to the teaching of French as a foreign language. [iii]

There is a growing body of literature available about this topic within the field of English as a second language (ESL), concerned initially with the teaching of singular *they* and the use of non-sexist denominations (Pauwels & Winter, 2006), but now fully integrating the issue of Queer language teaching (Moore, 2016; Nelson, 2009; Paiz, 2018).[iv] To my knowledge, there is a dearth of publications on the topic in relation to the second language teaching of gender-based European languages (but see Djavadghazaryans, 2020; Provitola, 2019). Teachers must be mindful of the values and identities of their students. Yet, because of this lack of data or simply the lack of information on the issue, the most well-intentioned educator may feel somewhat insecure about how to address new demands within their classroom. In this article, I adopt the point of view of the language teacher, within the Australian university context, and reflect on how the issue of non-conforming gender-neutral language can be addressed within the foreign language classroom, with a focus on the teaching of French as a foreign language. I will delineate the factors one would ideally consider in making the activities in the language classroom as inclusive and socially responsible as possible. I assume that, from a pedagogical point of view, some activities will eventually find their place within the framework of "individualised" instruction approaches that might be implemented with the use of new technologies of communication (such as adaptive self-paced online teaching modules).

I will first cover what is understood by grammatical gender in so-called gendered languages, then review proposals made with regards to gender-inclusivity and gender-neutrality in French, and finally, offer some reflections on how it can impact language programmes.

What is Grammatical Gender?

Unlike English where grammatical gender is limited to the pronominal (*he/she*) and the possessive systems (*his/her*),[v] many European languages, such as Spanish, French or German, widely taught in Australian universities, have a grammatical system whereby all nouns (ex. the words that refer to frying pans or penguins) are assigned a gender. From a descriptive point of view, when speaking of "grammatical" gender, linguists are not talking about biology or sexual identity, and it would be more precise to speak of "noun classes" and "agreement systems" to avoid the confusion (Corbett, 2007). But of course, when speaking of - and referring to - human beings, there is generally one preferred grammatical gender (but not always[vi]), the so-called "masculine" grammatical gender, used to refers to "male beings" and another gender, the so-called "feminine" grammatical gender, used to refers to "female beings."[vii]

In French and other Romance languages, all nouns are assigned either the masculine (*le pont* "the bridge') or the feminine (*la table* "the table') gender. There are exceptions called "epicene" nouns that either do not have a fixed grammatical gender and can alternate freely between both genders (*après-midi* "afternoon," *élève* "pupil" or *enfant* "child," *maire* "mayor," etc.), or have one specific grammatical gender that can be used indistinctly to refer to entities of all genders (*une personne* (fem.) "a person," *un individu* (masc.) "an individual," *un bébé* (masc.) "a baby," *une connaissance* (fem.) "an acquaintance," etc.). Gender distinctions also concern gendered titles of address: *Mesdames et Messieurs* "Ladies and gentlemen," and their abbreviations: *madame: Mme* "Mrs," *mademoiselle:*

Mlle "Ms," *monsieur* "M." "Mr," as well as names of professions and functions: *le serveur* (masc.) "the waiter," *la serveuse* (fem.) "the waitress."

Gendered third person pronouns (masculine and feminine subject: *il(s)~elle(s)* "he~she/they," object: *le~la/les* "him~her/them," tonic pronouns: *lui/eux~elle(s)* "him~her/them," demonstratives: *celui/ceux~celle(s)-ci* "this/these') can create an anaphoric relation with gendered nouns within or across sentences. Crucially, in gendered languages, gender is pervasive: agreeing terms change their form based on the gender and number of the noun they are modifying: determiners (*un~une* "a/some," *le~la/les* "the'), etc., adjectives (*petit~petite* "small'), and past participles (*fait~faite* "done'). All these categories cannot not agree in gender and number with the noun they are referring to.[viii]

These are the basic linguistic characteristics of gender agreement systems (Elmiger, 2015). However, teachers and learners of foreign languages are usually exposed to the notion of grammatical gender via the prism of "prescriptive" grammar rules. These may be ideologically biased. For instance, at the time of universal education policies, in 19th century France, sexist prescriptivist grammatical rules, such as the oft-quoted "the masculine always wins in matters of agreement." were imposed by the educational system under the guise of objectivity, a rule which, although first proposed in 17th century by the French Academy, had never been part of common usage in previous centuries, and should probably be revised (Viennot, 2014).[ix]

Another example, as far as French adjectives are concerned, would be the orthographic rule taught in all manuals on how to form the feminine of adjectives. The rules tells us that, with the exception of the subset of adjectives already ending with the letter "-e" in their spelling (*rouge* "red'), one must add an "-e" to the basic masculine form (*petit + e = petite* "small'), with many orthographic adjustments.

The masculine is again assumed to provide the base from which the feminine is derived. However, as discussed in Herschensohn (1993) and Lodge *et al*. (1997), there is an important difference between the written medium, that over-emphasizes the feature of Gender, even in cases when the gender difference is not audible (*bleu + e = bleue* "blue," *noir + e = noire* "black'), and the spoken medium, where a difference in gender is audible for only about 30% of adjective types.[x] Furthermore, the grapheme "-e" used to mark the feminine in writing is not itself pronounced in Standard French, but rather conventionally indicates that the preceding consonant is to be pronounced: for instance, the final [t] consonant of *petit* ('small') is not pronounced in the masculine while it is in the feminine *petite*. Finally, such an orthographic rule concerned only with the written form is, in fact, inadequate to describe the rule that speakers must have internalized when acquiring their language in infancy based on the speech they were exposed to. If the masculine actually constituted the base form, it would be impossible, or totally random, for the child to know which pronounced consonant, sometimes [t], sometimes [z], sometimes [d], sometimes others, would have to be added to the masculine to form the feminine. A more descriptively adequate rule from the point of view of the acquisition of spoken French should be to start from the feminine, and derive the masculine by "subtracting" the final pronounced consonant, at least, for the 30% of adjectives types that do have an audible gender difference in pronunciation (*petite [t] > petit, grande [d] > grand, délicieuse [z] > délicieux*).[xi] Again, a descriptive rather than prescriptive formulation of the grammar rule would appear less "sexist" than the one usually stated. So, it is not grammatical gender *per se* that is sexist, but the ideological way in which it is taught and has been traditionally formalized by prescriptive grammars.

From Gender Inclusivity to Gender Neutrality

The issue of gender-inclusivity in the French language started with the 70's feminist revendications

for women to be recognized in all sectors of the society against the prevalent stereotypes that rendered them invisible. One specific point of contention was that most prestigious professions did not have a feminine name. So, one would be expected to say somewhat illogically: *Madame le professeur* "Mrs. the-(masc.) professor-(masc.)." As a result of demands for equality between men and women, a feminine form has been coined or revived for each name of profession or trade when these did not exist (*auteur/autrice* or *auteure* "author-(masc./fem.)') by reinvigorating derivational processes already contained in the language (Cerquiglini, 1999), and these terms have since generally been accepted and are by now widely in use (Arbour *et al.*, 2014).[xii]

One institutional difficulty with rendering the language more inclusive, is that continental European languages usually have a long tradition of regulation and language planning by official bodies or government agencies. The best example is the "French Academy" officially established in 1635 to act as official authority on the language, mostly in the written medium.[xiii] Those bodies may be quite conservative and usually resist both change and choice. In contrast, gender inclusivity is nowadays promoted by various agencies, such as the *Office québécois de la langue française* (since 1981) or organisations, such as the United Nations, or the European Parliament. Notably, the United Nations secretariat (2017) has adopted a policy on non-sexist gender-inclusive language that promotes gender-neutrality among its six official working languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish). The underlying principle of gender-inclusive language is that in all communications women and men should be treated equally within the organisation. Each language, even as close as French and Spanish, might have a different preferred strategy to achieve that goal: for instance, in French, when referring to a group of people, the UN advises their members to use neutral epicenes terms (*une personne* "a person," *une équipe de recherche* "a research team') or *doublets* (*les étudiantes et étudiants* "the female students and male students'), the latter, when deemed necessary to emphasize the role of women against prevalent stereotypes, while, in Spanish, it rather advises the use of collective terms (*el alumnado* "the student population'). In 2015, a formal proposal for non-sexist writing, the so-called *écriture inclusive* ('inclusive writing'), has been recommended in France by the *Haut conseil à l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes* ('High committee for the equality between women and men'). It makes use of the *point median* ('middle period'): "·" (Alt+0183) (often replaced in practice by more convenient typographical means: *étudiant.e.s, étudiant-e-s* or *étudiant/e/s*) to render both genders visible in all agreeing terms.[xiv] So, instead of writing the *doublet Chères étudiantes et chers étudiants* "Dear-(masc-pl) students-(fem-pl) and dear-(masc-pl) students-(masc-pl)," one would write in a more concise manner: *Cher·e·s étudiant·e·s* "Dear-(masc·fem·pl.) students-(masc·fem·pl.)" [xv] [xvi]

In parallel, under Anglo-Saxon influence, and the need to find equivalent forms to the dedicated singular *they*, more pressing demands have been expressed to entirely get rid of grammatical gender binarity at the level of the language itself, particularly by persons who do not identify with exclusively masculine or feminine gender identities. In Romance languages, however, no such genderless "neutral" forms exist to refer to people.[xvii] Furthermore, the gender feature being pervasive in agreement phenomena, the changes required would be more far-reaching than simply imposing the use of a gender-neutral pronoun, such as the English singular *they* and its associated forms: *them, their*, which were already part of the language. Proposals emanating from various linguistic, feminist or LGBTQIA+ circles have been made to find a more gender-neutral way of referring to human beings in gender-based languages: these may vary from country to country, or sometimes within a country, some are concerned only with the written form, most with the written and the spoken form.

In the francophone space, the most well-known gender-inclusive gender-neutral pronouns are: "ille." initially used only in writing (Labrosse, 1996), and "iel." "yel." "ielle." pronounced [jɛl], all contractions of *il/elle* "he/she." To accompany these gender-neutral subject pronouns, new morphemes

were created: "lae" for *la/le* "the," "her/him," "cellui" for *celle/celui* "this," "celleux" for *celles/ceux* "these," "man" for *ma/mon* "my," "ellui" for the tonic pronouns *elle/lui* "her/him" or "elleux" for *elles/eux* "them," as well as new derivational suffixes and spelling rules for a neutral agreement, such as the use of the suffixes "x" or "ae" in the singular: ex. *petix* or *petit*ae, replacing the gender-inclusive *petit·e* "small," or the suffixe "z" in the plural: ex. *supposez* instead of the gender-inclusive *supposé·e·s* "supposed" (Labrosse, 1996; Elminger, 2015; alexatseawriter, 2017).[xviii] In the last decade, more radical neo-pronouns, completely severing the link with the gendered pronouns, have been invented such as "ul" or "ol" (Barasc & Causse, 2014) or "al." an idiosyncratic form first used in the novel "*Requiem*" by Alpheratz (2015). All the forms above constitute original attempts to introduce gender-neutral forms as a third grammatical gender for use when referring to non-binary people, and for generic and collective uses, that is, when one speaks collectively of men and women in general. It is not an exaggeration to say that they might (initially) sound very strange and would be difficult to use consistently even for native speakers of the language. alexatseawriter (2017) makes it clear that they are not to be conceived as "rules," and that their use is a matter of personal choice. Greco (2018, 2019), who studied the actual use of these terms among Queer associations in Brussels, praises the language creativity involved in the process, which he describes as "Do-it-yourself language strategies" (2019, p. 11).

When evaluating the future of such innovations, and their possible dissemination in the wider society, one must consider that, if the conventions of the written language can indeed be modified through spelling reforms, usually with the aim of simplifying the orthography, and disseminated via the education system and/or the press, the spoken language goes through a slow process of change across generations of speakers. It is never certain whether a given grammatical form will spread and take hold in the wider language community, and such modification of a grammatical feature that is inherently part of the language cannot just be artificially imposed, unless it has wide agreement in the society. So, there is no way to know whether the introduction of a third neutral grammatical gender will impose itself in the common usage outside of selected circles. This does not preclude their usage among native speakers of Queer communities to affirm their group identity.

However, the reality is that none of these options has been universally adopted as part of the standard language, and few are known outside of informed circles. Furthermore, there does not appear to be a consensus on which form to use, even among the non-binary community. A survey and report, entitled *Le langage dans la communauté non-binaire* ('Language among the non-binary community') was originally published in 2017 by Eliot, on the blog *Unique en son genre* ('Unique in their gender'), now hosted by the blog: *La vie en queer* "Life as queer') (Eliot, 2018 [2017]; Labainville 2017). Based on a sample of 286 answers, it shows that most of the non-binary respondents to the survey use a range of pronouns to refer to non-binary people: 56.3% of respondents sometimes use *elle* "she," 54.5% sometimes use *il* "he," 50% sometimes use *iel* "he/she" (or one of its spelling variants: "ielle." "yel"), but only 8.4% of respondents in the survey use exclusively (a form of) *iel* "he/she" as compared to 15.4% who use exclusively *elle* "she" and 14.3% who use exclusively *il* "he." The gender-neutral neo-pronouns "ol/olle." "ael." or "ul" (no data available on "al") appear marginal, used occasionally only by 7.3%, 3.8% and 2.8% of respondents, respectively, all three taken-together are used exclusively by only 3.8% of respondents. According to the survey, the most successful neo-forms in France therefore seem to be pronouns of the "iel" type, but some may prefer other options.[xix] All these forms are used alongside the gendered pronouns, not replacing them, as the standard binary agreement forms are still used to refer to cisgender persons and to objects. Furthermore, indecision exists as well for the other agreeing forms: the majority of respondent using one or the other grammatical gender rather than a dedicated form. For instance, according to the survey most respondents use the masculine form of adjectives (68.9%), apparently perceived as more neutral in pronunciation, or the feminine form (58.8%), or, interestingly, find ways and formulas to neutralize gender marking altogether (55.2%).

In another study, Bolter (2019) reminds us of the impact of social pressure and context of use. In a report on semi-guided interviews conducted in 2018 with four self-identified non-binary French persons on their use of pronouns, it appears that the strategies identified reveal a complex reality, each of the individuals interviewed making distinct choices depending on the situation of use, within the close network of family and friends, within Queer associations, or at work, with most compromises made in the working environment as social advancement is heavily dependent on the use of the standard language. Again, no unique pronoun reveals itself as the preferred one to the exclusion of other forms: some of the participants mix pronouns (*il, elle, iel, ol* are mentioned), others have a marked preference towards one form or the other in speech, for instance, towards the opposite gender to the one assigned at birth, but they all seem to agree on adopting the tenets of inclusive writing with the middle point and double suffixes.[xx]

Gender-inclusivity and Gender-neutrality in Foreign Language Classes

What is the import of the above considerations for the foreign language teaching of gendered languages? Before examining how strategies of language inclusivity and/or gender-neutrality are already - or could be - implemented in practice in language classrooms, let us start by setting up the basic principles all educators can agree on. As expressed by Prof. O'Leary (p.c.), Head of the school of Humanities and Languages at UNSW, we should "make sure all our students are treated respectfully and, as much as possible, their preferences are met even while using the target language." and "make sure all our students become aware of the issues, the way different languages are addressing the issues, the complicated interactions between living languages, bodies such as the Académie, the UN, etc."

A first and simple manifestation of respect towards the student population is to ask students how they would like to be addressed, by what name and what term of civility - sometimes different from the name and title on the official list?[xxi] This is a simple information, usually collected at the beginning of the term, which can avoid misunderstandings. Then, teachers should pay attention to the way they express themselves and, following the recommendations and guidelines from the United Nations or the European Parliament, systematize their use of gender-inclusive formulations in order to express themselves in a non-sexist manner in their usual communication with the student population whether in English or in the target language. The use of inclusive language would proactively show the students that this is an important issue and that they are welcome to express themselves freely and honestly in a non-sexist way.[xxii] Importantly, in a foreign language classroom, the teacher cannot expect the learners to inform them of what forms they would like to use in the target language as learners are still discovering the language and are probably not informed about the available linguistic possibilities, nor about the societal debates in the French speaking space. Yet, there are more and more pressing demands emanating from students themselves to know about these forms. Teacher could therefore provide a choice of options among which interested students could then choose from and/or guide the students towards informative sites. Given that most teachers strive to exclusively use the foreign language within the classroom, some aspects of these discussions might have to happen in English and be negotiated outside of the language class.

In a language course, the standard language, that is, the codified variety, used for international communication, administration, the media, and education, forms the basis of teaching. It is the variant used in all textbooks and reference grammars. Language teachers usually consider their duty to teach the standard version of the language to prepare their students to communicate effectively with the native speakers of that language. Therefore, the sociological variants (for instance, expressions used in specific geographical regions or countries of the French speaking space, or expressions belonging to slangs (*argot*) or specialised jargons, and familiar registers) are only introduced sparingly and progressively in the learning process, usually at higher levels of proficiency, or within dedicated

courses dealing with such sociolinguistic issues. Furthermore, current communicative and actional methods of language teaching require active participation of the students during interactive activities and tasks conducted with their peers and/or the instructors, in face-to-face or online modes. So, students will be expected not only to learn, but also to use and practice orally and in writing all sorts of grammatical forms and vocabulary items, including the equivalent of "she" and "he," and all associated aspects of agreement in Gender, Number, or Person, as these are essential grammatical features of the language they are learning (ex. the word "table" in French is referred to as "she" or "her" and triggers feminine agreement with modifying adjectives and determiners).

Fortunately, many non-binary modes of expressions are available to students within the strictest of use of the standard: they are described as strategies of "neutralisation" of gender differences in Elmiger (2015), and are indeed practiced by francophone non-binary native speakers themselves (Eliot 2017, alexatseawriter, 2017; Provitola, 2019): for instance, one could systematically use formulations such as: *Je viens d'Australie* "I am from Australia" to avoid the gendered form: *Je suis australien·ne* ('I am Australian'), or use the indefinite: *Je suis quelqu'un de patient* "I am someone patient" rather than using the gendered form: *je suis patient·e* "I am patient," or systematically employ epicene adjectives for which the difference in gender is not perceptible in the standard pronunciation. Another strategy, already implemented with non-binary students in some language classes (Valérie Combe-Germes, p.c.), might be for the student to change their gender at will rather than being assigned a fixed gender: one could prefer being referred to with a masculine pronoun in a given day/week/month, or for a given activity, and a feminine pronoun on another. Such freedom, in fact, could be generalized to the whole class to help every student practice the use of gendered pronouns in communicative activities. In testing situations, they are expected to declare their preferred chosen gender for the assignment at hand. Finally, as suggested in Moore (2016), "teachers must include sociolinguistic competency in their pedagogy in order to allow students to control their level of personal disclosure in culturally appropriate ways" (p. 103), that is, provide training and provide the specific linguistic constructions on how to circumvent unwanted questions. As they require a more nuanced use of the language, the application of such strategies will, in fact, help learners deepen their ability to manipulate diverse syntactic constructions in the foreign language, and various exercises can be designed to help students develop that ability.

The goals of language teaching, however, may differ from one institution to the next and the motivation for learning a language may vary for each individual learner. Generally, the main goal is indeed to teach and learn the received standardized version of the language, that is, the variant of the language as it is spoken and written now, so that learners will be able to join and integrate in the community of the native speakers of the target language, and in a sense discover the other culture from the inside, but this ambitious external goal concerns a minority of students. Another more internal goal may be also for learners to open their mind, for instance, by changing their internal mode of thinking, including what they are paying attention to in the world when speaking: learning a language with different grammatical features from their own language(s) forces learners to pay attention to features of the world in a way that is different from their native language (ex. pay attention to whether an action is in progress or already completed in the past). Increasingly, student-centred pedagogies tend to place the learners" individual need and motivation at the core of the educative process and aim to develop learner autonomy and independence in language learning (Jacobs & Toh-Heng, 2013; Woodrow, 2006). Such individualized attention is now facilitated by computer-based adaptive learning environments (Heift, 2016; Vandewaetere *et al.*, 2011) that allow students to answer questionnaires, complete online quizzes, or work on documents at their own pace, and receive dedicated feedback based on their individual learning needs. This approach also entails that teachers must be mindful of the values and specific interests of the individuals that are in front of them, and of the most appropriate way to communicate with them. So, the issue of language inclusivity and/or gender neutrality is a new dimension that

teachers will increasingly have to address, even in the target language, as it corresponds to the multiple identities of their learners.

It is not pedagogically advisable to expect novice learners of a language to use relatively rare idiosyncratic grammatical forms that are not part of the standard language while they are still trying to master the basic features of the language. The use of these many forms is challenging even for native speakers. Their generalized introduction in language courses would be rendered even more delicate because of the paucity of authentic or artificial material to base pedagogical activities on, while acquisition is dependent on frequent repetition and exposure. However, it is never too early to raise awareness among the general student population about the societal issues of gender inclusivity and gender diversity, especially in relation to the language. For instance, all language textbooks currently in use are based on - and closely follow - the traditional heterosexist assumptions. As mentioned in Provitola (2019), questioning the implicit ideological biases of the textbooks has, in fact, the potential of developing the critical thinking among the general student population: "We need to revisit and revise trans-exclusionary textbooks with materials that do not purvey cissexist and binarist attitudes, and to critically engage with those problematic materials still in use" (p. 11) (see also Moore, 2016). With respect to the absence of non-sexist or inclusive language in current textbooks, *ad hoc* solutions might have to be devised such as the addition of activities and tasks outside of the normal textbook, or the modification of the written instructions given to textbook exercises to make them more gender inclusive in their formulation. Such awareness raising of gender issues (for instance, via a presentation of the principle of inclusive writing) might even lead the learners to acquire a better understanding of what grammatical gender and agreement systems are.

Awareness raising may also consists in debating movies or movies excerpts, press articles, or documentaries that expose a point of view on the societal issue, as long as the classroom is open to an honest discussion of such issues in a respectful manner. This not limited to core language courses, and contextual studies courses are particularly suited for such awareness raising. For instance, the societal and linguistic aspects of the feminisation of the names of professions can be studied in courses on the French speaking world or on French linguistics. Therefore, for more advanced students and in contextual courses, "this issue [can be used] as a rich learning opportunity around grammar, social convention, and changing social mores" (O'Leary, p.c.).

Informing the students about these societal issues does not mean that all would be expected to learn the neo-morphemes, as the standard language learning process is challenging enough. Beyond the standard language, however, some individuals, because of personal interest or to prepare their study abroad programme, might find it worth the effort to acquire and use in their own speech some innovations in morphology relating to gender-neutral language, or inclusive-writing, in order to express themselves honestly and in agreement with their identity, when referring to themselves or to non-binary persons. This should probably be reserved for students at higher levels of proficiency, as the appropriate use of these neo-form presupposes a solid knowledge of the standard gendered forms they are contrasted with. The interested students should be made aware that such forms are difficult to use even by native speakers, may not be known by the general population, and that their usage is highly dependent on the context (Bolter, 2019). Among the many neo-pronouns and grammatical forms offered in French, and in view of a lack of consensus about their use, I tentatively suggest that the more widely known, *iel* and its associated forms in speech, as well as the use of inclusive writing (with the median period) could be useful starting points. In line with practices among native speakers, the use of these forms should not be perceived as mandatory, but as a matter of personal choice.

Finally, the issue of non-binarity may need institutional support beyond the classroom. Many universities send their students in study-abroad programmes. Provitola (2019), retelling their study

abroad experience in France, recommends that: "Study abroad offices and language departments should help create guidelines and generate lists of resources for transgender students, in order to support them during their time away and help them navigate these issues in a less familiar cultural environment" (p. 11). Returning self-declared non-binary students could be invited to share their experience of study abroad. As suggested by James Phillips (p.c.), dedicated interactive skits could also be designed for students to reflect upon the appropriateness of using non-binary language when they find themselves within the foreign speaking society: which form will be most appropriate, in which context should they use them or not, what reaction might they expect from their interlocutors?[xxiii]

Conclusion

Focusing on French, a European gender-based language, I have examined how language teachers can deal with the introduction of gender-inclusive and gender-neutral language in foreign language teaching of gender-based languages and raise awareness about LGBTQIA+ issues in Australian language programmes. I have identified some actions that concern the whole student population:

- identify early what name and term of civility student choose to be addressed with (sometimes different from the name and title on the official list).
- for teachers, generalise the use of non-sexist gender-inclusive ways to address the student body in all communication and pedagogically related activities in the target language, as recommended by the United Nations secretariat.
- train students to use formulations of the standard language that neutralise the gender distinction (use of epicene words) and to use ways to evade unwanted questions.
- proactively encourage students to choose their grammatical gender at will, in class activities and testing material.
- raise awareness of language and societal issues linked with non-sexist modes of expression and non-conforming gender identities, in ways that will develop their critical thinking (notably by uncovering hidden biases in textbooks and/or prescriptive grammar rules).

There are more open-ended issues, that might have to be negotiated on a case by case basis, to answer personalised demands, specifically with respect to the more specialized non-binary and inclusive languages that some advanced and motivated students might want to experiment with:

- What specific gender-neutral pronouns propose to the students among the multiple possibilities available, given that there is no real consensus (not even among the non-binary community)? (Forms of *iel* "he/she" and associated forms seem to be the more popular variants in Europe and Québec).
- In languages characterized by pervasive gender concord within and across sentences, what solutions can the teacher propose for the many other agreeing forms: pronouns, articles/determiners, adjectives, and past participles? (Again, inclusive writing with the middle period seems to be a more consensual proposal in writing at this point).
- In which context is it appropriate for students and teachers to use such forms, in their oral and written interactions, within the classroom and within the wider society? (The general tendency is that these forms should not be normatively imposed but chosen freely to refer to non-binary people and as collectives).

Given funding, and the development of optional online modules for foreign language learners, the approach of individualized adaptive learning made available by computer assisted language learning might make it possible for motivated advanced learners to choose to study these alternative modes of expression.

Furthermore, at the institutional level, the office of international exchanges could provide non-binary

students with specific advice on what to expect when immersed in an unfamiliar culture during their study abroad programme, and specific skits might be prepared to help them deal with the possible scenarios they are likely to encounter. Finally, interviews with non-binary students themselves should be conducted to have a better appraisal of their needs in the foreign language classroom and in preparation of their study abroad.

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ⁱ LGBTQIA+ means Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Intersexed Agender Asexual and Ally community. Queer is often used as an umbrella term, as in Provencher (2007), Greco (2018).

ⁱⁱ There is a tension between gender-neutrality and gender-inclusiveness that I will ignore. The latter as an originally feminist revendication for women to be visible favours the realisation of the feminine grammatical gender alongside the masculine, the former, requested by more radical feminists and people with non-conforming gender identities, aims at eliminating the gender-distinction and create a third "neuter" gender.

ⁱ ⁱⁱ The article focusses on French because it is the author's area of specialty, but its conclusions can be extrapolated to the teaching of other gendered languages.

ⁱ ᵛ Pauwels & Winter (2006), for instance, attempted to alleviate ESL teachers" fear about the teaching of these non-standard forms to foreign language learners. For a recent study on native speakers" participation to this grammatical change in progress, see Konnelly & Cowper (2020).

ᵛ English also has some gendered nouns: *man~woman, brother~sister*, etc.

ᵛⁱ Generally, but not always: some epicene names can be referred to anaphorically (grammatical gender) or semantically (sexual gender): *la sentinelle… il / elle…* "the (fem.) sentry…, he / she…."

ᵛⁱⁱ Research by Boroditsky *et al*. (2000) shows that the grammatical gender of the name of an object may have some deterministic effect on the way people access these names.

ᵛⁱⁱⁱ In French, the gender opposition is neutralised for determiners and object pronouns in the plural (ex. *les ami(e)s* "the friends") and for definite determiners immediately followed by a vowel (ex. *l'ami/e* "the friend," *mon ami/e* "my friend").

ⁱˣ The traditional usage was apparently agreement by proximity with the gender of the closest noun.

ˣ This percentage reflects the standard pronunciation and may vary according to the variety of French. In my own dialect, the difference of gender is clearly audible in adjectives ending in vowels (Dominicy, 2012).

ˣⁱ Some refinements are necessary to deal with predictable vowel changes, notably with nasal vowels. See Herschensohn (1993), Lodge *et al*. (1997) for some refinements. It must also be pointed out that some phonological theories do in fact agree with the spelling approach.

ˣⁱⁱ This is a successful case of linguistic interventionism corresponding to a social demand. One can still find the outdated traditional conception in language textbooks and occasional debates, but even the French Academy tolerates them since 2016.

ˣⁱ ⁱⁱ See also the "Real Academia Espanola" created in 1713. Nowadays, these institutions only have a symbolic power, while ministries regulate language use in education, the media and administration.

ˣⁱ ᵛ This proposal, strongly condemned by the French academy claiming that it would place the French language *en péril mortel* ("in mortal danger," my translation), led to a controversy in the media in 2017. The triggering event was the publication by the publisher Hatier (Paris) of a gender-inclusive primary school manual (Le Callennec 2017), eventually rejected by the Ministry of Education. Here are two representative newspaper articles about this controversy: Janin (2017)*,* or Timsit (2017).

ˣᵛ Note that this formulation leaves the interpretation of the implicit coordinating conjunction: *and*, *or*, *neither nor*, to be established in context and there are some hesitations concerning the typographical accents and the plural: *cher·e·s, cher·ère·s, cher·es, cher·ères "dear"* could all constitute acceptable spellings.

ˣᵛⁱ Some aspects of "non-sexist" or "inclusive language" are already an option for French grammatical checking in Microsoft Office 365 since 2017, and apparently a new type of AZERTY keyboard that includes the middle period as a default character is commercialized since 2018 in the French speaking world.

ˣᵛⁱⁱ In languages like German, for instance, a neuter pronoun, *es* "it," does exist, but as it is used only to refer to inanimate objects, it might (at least initially) be perceived as insulting when referring to human beings (Djavadghazaryans, 2000).

ˣᵛⁱⁱⁱ These strategies mirror the creativity manifested in the Hispanic world by the creation of non-gendered pronouns such as "elle" and "ellix," popularized by non-binary people in Chile and in North America respectively, as well as the proposals of single written suffixes such as "X" or "e" to replace gender marking with "o" and "a": *lX niñX pequeñX / le niñe pequeñe* "the small child."

ˣⁱˣ *iel* is also the preferred choice in the dictionary of the *Office québécois de la langue française* (2019).

ˣˣ They all seem to mention some difficulties with terms of civility *monsieur* (Mr.) or *madame* ("Mrs").

ˣˣⁱ In Australia, the use of titles is not common when addressing students, and therefore the avoidance of such titles should not be a problem. A more formal language is likely to be used in France, but no French gender-neutral term is available in

French, unless one borrows the English term of address: Mix.

xxii Djavadghazaryans (2020) proposes to include an explicit statement in the course outline.

xxiii As suggested by a reviewer, students should be warned that uninformed members of the native-speaking communities might occasionally assume that their use of these forms is simply erroneous and indicative of their limited command of the target language. More data is needed on such matters and returning exchange students could provide us with valuable information on their experience abroad.